



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

SURVIVALS OF OLD MARRIAGE-CUSTOMS AMONG THE  
LOW GERMANS OF WEST MISSOURI.<sup>1</sup>

BY WILLIAM G. BEK.

THE people whose peculiar marriage-customs I shall describe inhabit a portion of western Saline County, northwestern Pettis County, north-eastern Johnson County, and a large portion of Lafayette County in west Missouri. The nucleus of this settlement is Concordia in Lafayette County, a small prairie town of about nine hundred inhabitants. An irregular line, varying from eight to twenty-five miles in distance, roughly includes the region in question. Barring a few small centres where the English have retained their hold, this domain is singularly German. Survivals of European customs are met at every hand. The major portion of these people hail from Hanover or are descendants of Hanoverians. The broad dialect of this province, therefore, naturally prevails. However, the more pointed speech of the Westphalian and that of the inhabitant of Lippe Detmold is also sporadically heard. The High Germans and Swiss who have strayed among these Low Germans are very few in number. So strong is the influence of the Low German dialect that the descendants of the High Germans soon acquire the prevailing Low German dialect.

The first Hanoverian who ventured into the wilds of west Missouri was Heinrich Dierking, whom the older generations of that region still familiarly call "Troester" Dierking. He settled either in 1838 or 1839 near the present site of Concordia. It is rather singular that a lone German should venture so far inland. Usually the first settlers remained close to the larger rivers. Investigation reveals the fact that Heinrich Dierking had married an American woman soon after his arrival in America. When he arrived in Lafayette County he was accompanied by one Dick Mulkey. He therefore drifted so far west in company with English friends, and most probably with the kin of his wife's family. The fertile prairies of Lafayette County and the rich, well-wooded creek bottoms pleased this German pioneer exceedingly. His letters to his friends and kin in Hanover soon brought them to his neighborhood. And thus, through "the Consciousness of Kind," this region became settled by a people, bound together by like tradition, like speech, and in many instances by blood-relationship. All of them came to seek improvement of economic conditions. They came unprompted and unaided by settlement or immigration societies, not, like the settlers of Hermann, Missouri, to found a new German state in this country, nor,

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Missouri Folk-Lore Society, at their meeting at St. Louis, February 8, 1908.

like the Keilites of Shelby County, Missouri, to carry out the whim of their leader, nor, like the religionists of Perry County, to transplant the Lutheran faith to this western soil, but simply as farmers who found the tillage of their small, worn-out acres in Germany too meagre a source of income. Once having gotten a foothold in that rich agricultural country of west Missouri, they, by the peaceful method of purchase, drove, as they still are driving, their English-speaking neighbors farther and farther out, until now one may journey for many miles without meeting an Englishman in this region. No price seems too high for them, provided the land is good and conveniently located. Many of their English neighbors, still clinging to a cheap aristocracy, find themselves compelled to sell to them to avoid the foreclosure of the mortgages which rest on their estates. In this peaceful manner this prosperous community, year by year, stretches farther and farther in all directions.

Of a foreign-born population of 2342 (cf. U. S. Census of 1900) in Lafayette County, 1589, or almost 68 per cent., are German. According to the same census, Saline County has 560 foreign-born Germans. Most of these are living in the western part of this county. We are, therefore, safe in assuming that 460 of them live in the region under discussion. Johnson County has 270 foreign-born Germans, at least 200 of whom belong to the Concordia country. Pettis County has 784 Germans of foreign birth, most of whom are living in or around Sedalia. It is entirely safe, however, to say that 150 of them inhabit the region here discussed. This gives us a total of 2399 foreign-born Germans in the Concordia country. It must at once be manifest that this number does not nearly represent the total number of Germans in this district. The settlement is an old one for this western country, and the families are very large. It is, therefore, entirely safe to reckon the German population at four times the number 2399, or 9596.

By reason of their occupation and of their great number, these Germans have become very seclusive and rather self-satisfied, mingling comparatively little with the outside world. Church and school have contributed their share to keep things German very much alive among them. The customs which their fathers brought from beyond the sea live and are being perpetuated by succeeding generations. And so it happens that customs have survived among them in this, a foreign land, for three quarters of a century, customs which had their inception many centuries ago in another land. The very customs which I shall speak of are discussed among other old customs by Hans Meyer in his "*Das Deutsche Volkstum*," pp. 276-279.

During a few years of residence in this settlement, I had ample opportunity to observe some of the customs of these people. They are a pleasure-loving people. Their parties, shooting-matches, picnics, and

similar gatherings are very largely attended. All the means of amusement and social intercourse, however, dwindle into insignificance when compared with a typical Low German marriage feast. I shall describe one of these as I observed it, and I shall let it serve as a type.

The engagement of a very wealthy young couple had been rumored for some time. On a certain day, the brother of the groom-to-be made his appearance at our house, in the capacity of *Hochzeitsbitter* or *Brautbitter* (that is, the person who invites guests to the wedding). He was mounted on a thoroughbred. The bridle and saddle were gayly decorated with many ribbons. The hat of the *Hochzeitsbitter* was also adorned with a mass of bright-colored ribbons, varying in length from one half to two yards. So numerous were these streamers, that the hat itself was invisible. In the stiff March breeze, which was augmented by the speed at which the horse travelled, the horse and rider were one splendid confusion of colors. It was with the greatest difficulty that the rider retained possession of his head-covering. In addition to these ribbons, the hat-band was studded with coins and paper money. While approaching the house, the *Hochzeitsbitter* uttered short piercing cries and discharged a heavy pistol. After entering the house he delivered his invitation by reciting, in an awkward manner, a short poem, which in a long drawn out way bade those present to attend the ceremony at a certain time and place. His mission ended, he sped on, uttering shouts and discharging his pistol, as at his approach. The wedding ceremony took place in a small country church. Crowds of invited guests, from far and near, attended. After the simple, brief ceremony every one hastened to his horse or conveyance. The bride and groom rode in a new spring wagon, drawn by two thoroughbreds. The *Hochzeitsbitter* officiated as driver of this wagon. After he had gotten a fair start, the whole crowd dashed after this wagon at a dead-run. The home of the groom's father, where the celebration was to be continued, was five miles away. Up and down the rolling prairie the mad chase took its course. Every one attempted to overtake and, if possible, to pass the bridal pair. Suddenly the whole racing procession came to an abrupt halt. It was discovered by us who were in the rear, that a strong chain had been stretched across the road. It was the work of the small boy. The groom cast a handful of small coins among the youngsters. The chain was lowered and the mad chase resumed, to be checked a second and a third time in like manner. Finally, with foam-bedecked horses, we reached the home of the groom's father. A sumptuous feast was awaiting us. After this had been thoroughly enjoyed, the dishes of the table at which the bride had eaten were quickly cleared away. The table-cloth was seized by the married women, and a lively scramble ensued in an attempt to ensnare one of the girls with the table-cloth. Finally one of the young women was caught. The blushing maid was

led back in triumph, amid the congratulatory shouts of all those present, who hailed her as the next bride-to-be. Later in the afternoon the whole party adjourned to a nearby meadow. Here the bride and groom took their stand at one end of the spacious field, the groom holding a broom in his hand. The young men all retired to the opposite side of the meadow. A foot-race followed, the winner seizing the broom in triumph, which victory symbolically designated him as the next groom to be. In the evening there came a dance, which lasted until daybreak. The following night occurred the charivari in its most deafening form.

It may not be out of place to explain some of these peculiar practices. There is no doubt that many of them date back many, many years in the history of our race. That they should survive in the land where they originated is not so surprising. But that they should prevail in an entirely foreign environment, surrounded by strange customs, is indeed noteworthy. The voluntary isolation of these people in a measure explains their existence.

The ribbons which adorn the hat of the *Hochzeitsbitter* are the contributions of those persons whom he has invited. The coins and paper money on his hat-band come from the same source. The money becomes a part of the bride's dowry. The giving of the ribbons, I take it, is a survival of a custom of giving much more valuable gifts. At the bride's home, or wherever the ceremony is continued, the *Hochzeitsbitter* always wears his decorated hat, which in itself shows how many persons have been invited. The guests bring presents to the wedding, and it is the duty of the *Hochzeitsbitter* to receive and arrange them. Besides these duties, he has others, the chief of which is the entertainment of the guests. He is a very busy person and in his odd attire a most striking figure. Not only the *Hochzeitsbitter* is decorated with ribbons on the wedding-day, but also the guests adorn themselves. The buggy-whip always bears a long ribbon in order that every one may know the persons are going to the wedding as invited guests.

The chase which I described is no doubt a survival of a very old custom. It doubtless dates back to the time when men secured their wives by a chase; that is, they took them by force. This is, of course, not realized by those who participate in the race from the church. All that this chase means to them is that if any one succeeds in passing the bridal pair, the guests are given license to play all sorts of pranks at the place where the celebration is continued. The obstructions which the small boys placed in the way of the procession, and the accompanying ransom paid by the groom, most probably are a remnant of the time when women were secured by purchase.

I stated that the *Braubitter* delivered his invitation in poetic form. I have been fortunate enough to collect a few of these poems. They

are now getting rare and rather hard to obtain. The practice seems to be dying out, as the younger generations are succeeding the old. The poems are usually handed down by word of mouth. The persons who now possess them have, as a rule, served in the capacity of *Brautbitter* themselves. When a young man has to perform this duty, he seeks some old man who knows such a poem, and with much labor learns it from him. Like most things that come down to us by word of mouth, there are doubtless many things in these poems at the present time which may, with certainty, be regarded as interpolations. As will be seen, they are in High German. Although these people use only the Low German dialect in their daily intercourse, they always write in High German, and what poetry they may have is in High German. It is the language of the church and school, and whatever elements of culture may come to them in German come to them through the High German medium.

The following are some of the poems recited by the *Brautbitter*:—

Hier bin ich her gesandt,  
 Werde ein Brautbitter genannt.  
 In diesem Hause bin ich wohl bekannt.  
 Hier nehme ich meinen Hut und Stab  
 Und setze meinen Fuss darein  
 Dass ich möchte willkommen sein.  
 Sollt' ich nicht willkommen sein,  
 So bitte ich um eine Flasche Wein.  
 Eine Flasche Wein ist mir zu viel,  
 Ein kleiner Schnaps macht auch Pläsier.  
 Ich bin noch jung an Jahren,  
 Habe noch nicht viel erfahren,  
 Was ich erfahren hab' und weiss  
 Das will ich Euch sagen mit Fleiss.  
 Ich soll ein Kompliment bestellen  
 Von Junggesellen — und Jungfrau —  
 Sie haben sich vor einigen Wochen  
 Verlobt und versprochen,  
 Dass sie nächsten Sonntag Hochzeit halten.  
 Dazu lade ich Euch ein,  
 Herr und Frau, Söhne und Töchter, Gross und Klein,  
 Die im Hause zu finden sein.  
 Ich möchte, dass ihr sie besucht und ehrt  
 Und die Mahlzeiten verzehrt.  
 Zehn Kühe, zwanzig Ochsen, dreissig Gänsebraten,  
 Vierzig Schweinebraten, die werden schön geraten.  
 Und ein Fass Wein ist noch nicht über den Rhein.  
 Und wenn die Musikanten die Saiten lassen erklingen,  
 So kann ein jeder nach seinem Belieben tanzen und springen.  
 Und gutes Kartenblatt,  
 Damit ein jeder sein Vergnügen hat.  
 Nun kränzelt mein schön Hütlein  
 Mit vielen schönen Bändlein.  
 Habe ich meine Rede nicht gut gemacht,  
 So habe ich sie doch zu Ende gebracht.

The following is a rather free prose translation of this poem:—

Hither I have been sent, I am called the *Brautbitter*. In this house I am well known. Here I take off my hat and rest my staff and enter in. I trust I may be welcome. Should I not be welcome, then I ask for a flask of wine. A flask of wine is too much for me, a drink of brandy gives pleasure, too. I am still young in years, have not had much experience. What I know, however, I tell you with diligence. I am sent to deliver the compliments of Mr. — and Miss —. They became engaged a few weeks ago, and promised to get married next Sunday. To the wedding I invite you, lord and lady, sons and daughters, great and small, as they are in this house. I wish that you visit them and do them honor and consume the feast. Ten cows, twenty oxen, thirty roast geese, forty roast pigs, will be well prepared. And a barrel of wine is not yet over the Rhine. And when the musicians strike up the strings, then may each one after his liking dance. Also good card games will be prepared, that each one may have his pleasure. Now decorate my pretty hat with many a fine ribbon. Have I not said my speech well, I have at least brought it to a close.

Another poem of this kind is the following:—

Guten Tag in diesem Haus!  
Alle die in Küche und Keller sind kommt 'mal heraus  
Und höret zu  
Was ich Euch erzählen tu'.  
Hier komm' ich her geritten  
Und nicht geschritten.  
Mein Pferd habe ich müssen bei der Pforte lassen stehn,  
Und muss zu Fuss zum Hause eingehn.  
Was ich will ist Euch wohl bekannt,  
Hochzeitsbitter bin ich genannt  
Und ausgesandt  
Vom Bräutigam und der Braut.  
Der Bräutigam ist — und die Braut —  
Die Beiden lassen Euch freundlich grüssen und bitten,  
Knecht und Magd, Jung und Alt, Gross und Klein,  
So wie sie im Hause zu finden sein,  
Die sollen von mir gegrüsset und gebeten sein.  
Und wenn Ihr meine Bitte wollt recht verstehn,  
So könnt Ihr nächsten Dienstag zum Hause des — zur Hochzeit gehn.  
Und darnach könnt Ihr Euch laben,  
Mit dem was wir haben —  
Mit kaltem Bier und Branttewein.  
Denk' da wollen wir anfangen ein wenig lustig zu sein.  
Da sollt Ihr dann sehen  
Den Bräutigam bei seiner Geliebten stehen,  
Und die Kopulation anhören,  
Wie der Mann die Frau und die Frau den Mann soll ehren.  
Und wenn dies alles ist geschehn,  
So sollen die Tische mit vielem gerüstet stehn.  
Und wenn es Euch nicht mehr lüst' und schmeckt,  
So werden die Tische wieder abgedeckt.  
Und darnach will ich Euch verschaffen Raum und Platz, Feu'r und Licht,  
Damit ein jeder kann sehen was er verricht.  
Doch von weiterem zu erzählen fällt mir zu schwer,  
Gebt mir 'mal was zu trinken her.  
Ein Glas Bier ist nicht zu viel,  
Zwei ist mein rechtes Ziel.  
Wollt Ihr mich 'mal traktieren?

Sonst will ich lieber ein Haus weiter marschieren.  
 Und wer nun eine schöne Jungfrau will sein,  
 Die schmücke mein' Hut mit ein' schön Bändlein.  
 Was ich nicht bin, das kann ich noch werden,  
 Und was ich nicht weiss, das kann ich noch lernen.  
 Habe ich meine Rede nicht gut gemacht,  
 So habe ich sie doch kurz zu Ende gebracht.

A free translation of this poem is the following: —

Good day to all in this house! All who are in the kitchen and cellar, let them come out and listen to what I shall tell you. Hither I have come riding and not walking. My horse I had to leave standing at the gate and come a-foot to the house. What I wish is well known to you. *Hochzeitsbitter* I am called and sent by the bridegroom and the bride. The groom is —, the bride —. The two greet you kindly and pray that the man-servant and the maid-servant, young and old, great and small, as they are found in this house, shall be kindly greeted by me. And if you wish to understand my invitation better, then you may come next Tuesday to the home of Mr. — to attend the wedding. And after that you may refresh yourselves with cold beer and with brandy. I fancy there we shall begin to be merry. There you shall see the groom stand beside his bride and listen to the marriage ceremony, how the husband his wife and the wife her husband shall honor. And when all this is done, then the tables shall be set. And when you have satisfied your appetite, then the tables shall be cleared away. After that I'll provide room and space, fire and light, that each may see what he does. But to tell more is too hard for me. Give me something to drink. One glass of beer is not too much, two is my real capacity. Will you give me something to drink? Otherwise I desire to go a house farther. Now, she who wishes to be a good girl let her decorate my hat with pretty ribbons. What I am not, I may yet become, and that which I do not know I may yet learn. If I have not made my speech well, I have at least made it short and have brought it to a close.

The next poem plainly shows how imperfectly these things are remembered. The young farmer from whom these lines were obtained had served as *Brautbitter* some few years ago. The first part seems pretty well remembered. The close, however, suddenly comes to an abrupt stop.

Guten Tag! Guten Tag in diesem Haus!  
 Die Hochzeitsgäste bitt' ich heraus.  
 Hochzeitsbitter ist mein Begehr,  
 Und wenn es auch nicht gefällig wär'.  
 Es lassen Euch grüssen der Bräutigam — und die Braut —  
 Ihr sollt am nächsten Donnerstag zur Hochzeit kommen.  
 Dazu lad' ich Euch alle ein,  
 Gross und klein,  
 Und wie sie hier im Hause sein.  
 Potztausend, bald hätt' ich noch eins vergessen —  
 Die Hausfrau oder die Jungfrau  
 Muss mir den Hut noch bekränzen.

Among the poems which came into my possession, there is one which is not used by the Concordia Germans any more. It was used some years ago, however, as I am assured by trustworthy persons. It is not an invitation to the wedding, as will be seen; but it shows the survival of another custom, namely that of some one going to fetch the bride to the place where the wedding is to take place. This person may have



been a near kinsman or a good friend. Besides asking for the bride, the messenger admonishes the maid to observe certain things which will give her and those associated with her pleasure.

This is the poem:—

Guten Tag in diesem Haus,  
Mit einem gewünschten Hochzeitsgruss!  
Ich bin ausgesandt von dem Herrn Bräutigam,  
Um die Jungfrau Braut zu holen.  
Ist sie hier so wollen wir stille stehn,  
Ist sie nicht hier so wollen wir weiter gehen.  
Ist sie hier  
So trete sie herfür.  
Der Bräutigam wartet mit Verlangen,  
Mit Freuden wird er dich empfangen,  
An seinem Herd in seinem Haus.  
Das Haus zier Du mit Reinlichkeit,  
Dass Ordnung herrsche jederzeit.  
Sei Du zu allem nütze.  
O dann wird man stets Dich lieben,  
Nie betrüben.  
Deinem Stande  
Mache Du Ehre und keine Schande.  
Die Schwiegereltern liebe.  
Sei Du ihnen stets von Herzen gut  
Und sind sie traurig mach' ihnen Mut.  
Tu' es aus Kindesliebe.  
O dann ist die Ehe  
Ohne Wehe.  
Keine Leiden  
Werden Dich vom Frieden scheiden.

The English of this poem is the following:—

Good day to all in this house, with a welcome wedding greeting! I am sent by the groom to fetch the bride. If she is here, I will remain here; if she is not here, I will go on. If she is here, then let her step forth. The groom waits with longing, with joy to receive thee, at his hearth in his house. The house thou shalt adorn with cleanliness that order may reign at all times. Be thou useful in all things. Oh, then one will ever love thee, never grieve thee. To thy station lend thou honor and no dishonor. Thy parents-in-law do thou honor, be good to them from thy heart, and if they are sorrowful, give them courage. Do it in the love of a child. Oh, then is the married state without suffering. No discomfort will separate thee from peace.

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI,  
COLUMBIA, MO.